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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [LO](#)  
SUBJECT: HZDS AND MECIAR: CAN'T LIVE WITH HIM, CAN'T LIVE  
WITHOUT HIM

REF: A. BRATISLAVA 210  
[1](#)B. BRATISLAVA 263

Classified By: Ambassador Rodolphe Vallee for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Vladimir Meciar is being challenged for the leadership of his People's Party ) Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HzDS) for the first time in 14 years. HzDS Vice-Chairman Viliam Veteska,s reach for the HzDS top post is unlikely to succeed, but it reflects concerns about Meciar's lessened activity since his recent heart operation. For Veteska just holding onto a Vice-Chairmanship may be a victory given Meciar's penchant for revenge. The more interesting battle at the June 9 party congress will be over changes to the party's statutes. Meciar has proposed changes designed to further consolidate his power. Others are promoting more democracy in the party itself. At least one young HzDS member is completely disillusioned by this party where every one is out for themselves. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Veteska announced on April 17 that he will run for Party Chairman at the HzDS congress on June 9. Veteska is only the second person to challenge Meciar for the highest party post in the 16-year history of HzDS (after Milan Knazko in 1993). Political analysts immediately labeled Veteska's chances as poor, with several initially suggesting the "competition" might be a ruse organized by Meciar. Post has concluded from conversations with party contacts that the competition for the chairmanship is real and that Veteska's decision to run was a surprise to HzDS' top leadership and even to some of his own supporters.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Although Veteska's chances of success are slim, his candidacy has renewed focus on the question of who eventually will replace Meciar. Meciar's allies believe "the Chairman," who enjoys 13 percent approval ratings, is what got the party (barely) past the 5 percent barrier to Parliament in 2006 and predict HzDS would be swallowed by Smer without Meciar at its head. Meciar's skeptics hold their hands at a 45 degree angle to represent a graph showing HzDS' plummeting preferences over the last four election cycles - and argue that something, even if not Meciar now, must change. Ironically, having won just 8.79 percent of valid votes in 2006, HzDS finds itself in a more powerful position as the smallest of the three ruling-coalition parties than after the elections of 1998 and 2002 when it "won" (with 27 percent and 19.5 percent of votes respectively) but failed to find coalition partners to enter government.

HZDS: LOOKING FOR ITS PLACE SINCE 1998

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[1](#)3. (U) HzDS has known dissidents before. In 1993-94, 14 MPs left the party at the peak of its power, necessitating early elections. Current President Ivan Gasparovic left the party in 2002 when Meciar left his name off the candidate list for Parliamentary elections. Between 2002 and 2006, 16 HzDS Parliamentarians "defected" with the majority aligning themselves with the then-governing coalition.

¶4. (SBU) HzDS has been struggling to find a position at the ideological center of domestic politics since 1998, when Meciar lost power to a broad coalition of opponents united by little more than opposition to what they (and we) described as his autocratic rule. After failing to get into government for a second time in 2002, Meciar began publicly courting his former adversaries from the center-right, and curtailed or reversed his criticisms of Slovakia's allies in NATO and the EU. By the end of their second term in opposition, HzDS MPs were holding up then PM Dzurinda's minority coalition. In 2006 there was widespread speculation that HzDS would join a coalition with the three center-right parties -- a scenario under which HzDS would doubtless have enjoyed a relatively stronger position than it does under the overwhelming dominance of Smer in the present coalition. Bitter animosity between Meciar and the Head of the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH ) the smallest party to gain Parliamentary seats in 2006) was the main obstacle to such a coalition.

#### CHANGES TO HZDS STATUTES ARE THE REAL CONTEST

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¶5. (C) The more interesting contest at the June congress will be over changes to HzDS's statutes. Meciar is expected to seek a four year mandate as Chairman, as opposed to the now statutory two year mandate, and also to seek more centralized (read personal) control over the naming of regional and local party heads. Sergej Kozlik, a Meciar-skeptical member of the party leadership's Gremium, now "in exile" as a Member of the European Parliament, hopes he can "do business with" Veteska's doomed candidacy in order to bring more democracy to the party. Kozlik is working for a compromise that would allow Meciar and Veteska to keep their current positions, but would enhance party democracy by increasing the number of

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Vice-Chairmen to four or five, who would be nominated by congress delegates, rather than by the leadership alone. (Comment. Meciar and other HzDS leaders have been working hard over past years to persuade international observers that they are a reformed party devoted to democracy. His internal party maneuvers continually belie these claims. End comment.)

#### WHAT MOTIVATED VETESKA NOW?

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-- VETESKA WANTS TO SAVE THE PARTY AND BELIEVES HE CAN WIN:

¶6. (C) HzDS MP Tibor Mikus, who is also Governor of the Trnava region and Meciar's most outspoken critic within the party leadership, told poloff that he (and Veteska) sincerely believe the party will cease to exist if Meciar is not replaced. Mikus is highly critical of Meciar's personnel policies and his efforts to maintain one-man control of HZDS. Mikus acknowledged that most HZDS members support Meciar, but he believes that under Meciar the party has voters to lose and none to gain. Mikus defended Veteska's continuing public admiration for Meciar as necessary given that, for better or worse, Meciar is the gravitational center of the party and Veteska will need his acceptance -- and quite likely his participation as Honorary Chairman -- to save the party. A direct attack on Meciar would only raise his chances for re-election and destroy any hope of rebuilding the party in the aftermath.

-- VETESKA IS AN OPPORTUNIST AND A MUD-SLINGER:

¶7. (C) Others within HzDS believe Veteska is seeking to capitalize on the dissatisfaction of regional party officials who expected a return to government would bring more jobs and patronage than it has. Andrea Haskova, a Parliamentary Assistant to HzDS General Secretary Zdenka Kramplova, guessed that Veteska's proximate reason for challenging Meciar now is the many promises he made to regional party loyalists in the run-up to the 2006 election, when he waged an aggressive campaign for "preferential votes". Haskova speculated that Veteska has been unable to make good on the promises he made during the campaign. Haskova said Veteska has been promising

everyone he can secure more positions for HzDS functionaries than Meciar has been able to, and that the party will enjoy a stronger position in the government under his leadership. She repeatedly compared Veteska's candidacy to that of Pal Csaky, who recently won an upset victory for the Chairmanship of the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK) in a campaign that was most widely noted for whispered allegations of impropriety. (Ref A) Whether he wins or not is, according to Haskova, probably irrelevant to Veteska as long as he can demonstrate he has made a good faith effort to fulfill his promises. If he loses the battle and is duly removed from the party leadership, he will be able to leave the party and join Smer with better name recognition and a ready excuse for his earlier failure to deliver on political promises.

¶18. (C) Comment. Haskova is a political contact of poloff, but also a personal friend. Her comments in the paragraph above were meant for the record and reflect what she believed her boss, Kramplova, would have wanted her to say. Her personal comments follow in paragraphs 17-19. End comment.

-- VETESKA WANTS TO SAVE HIS VICE-CHAIRMANSHIP:

¶19. (C) Milan Urbani, HzDS, second Vice Chairman, told Ambassador April 18 that Veteska accepted the nomination for Chairman in order to gain a bargaining chip for keeping his position as a Vice-Chairman. Kozlik told poloff Veteska was talking about his candidacy among friends for quite some time, but finally acted without thinking and with too-little preparation when he learned Meciar didn't plan to nominate him for another term as Vice-Chairman. According to Kozlik, Veteska must realize he cannot win the Chairmanship, but he will stay in the fight at the urging of those around him who hope to use his candidacy to secure other reforms.

¶10. (C) Rumors of Meciar's displeasure with Veteska were wide-spread well before he announced his candidacy for the Chairmanship. It is conventional wisdom that Meciar was planning to relegate Veteska to a non-leadership position at the party congress. Meciar has, however, a history of reaping unintended consequences when he forces adversaries from positions of power within the party. Kozlik describes his tenure as an MEP as an exile, but now he is planning to come back and clearly expects to be a force in the party again. Mikus is sure Meciar wouldn't have allowed his nomination to be Governor of the Trnava region if he had ever imagined he could win. Meciar still refuses to shake the hand of President Gasparovic, who beat Meciar for that job less than three years after Meciar organized his removal from HzDS.

¶11. (C) PM Fico believes Meciar is nervous about the challenge to his leadership (Ref B). Fico, Mikus and Kozlik all acknowledge, however, that Veteska stands no chance

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unless the vote for party Chairman is held by secret ballot, which would be unprecedented and difficult to organize since Meciar has made it clear he wants an open contest.

MIKUS ON THE FUTURE OF HZDS

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¶12. (C) Mikus described this congress as the last chance for HZDS to turn around its ten-year decline in the polls before suffering the ultimate humiliation of failing to gain the five percent of votes needed to make it into the next Parliament. Win or loose, Mikus said he will stay with HzDS. Mikus was one of the founders of HZDS and said he feels responsibility for the party. He mocked Meciar's last attempt to get rid of him by nominating him as a long-shot candidate for Governor of the Trnava region. Now, Mikus feels he has more influence among HZDS ranks than before and claims to be confident of his ability to "decrown" Meciar, who cares only about himself and his property. Mikus made fun of Meciar's loyalists like Urbani and Kramplova, who he called brown-nosers and opportunists.

¶13. (C) Mikus was just finishing a meeting with Dzurinda when

poloff arrived at his office in Trnava. Mikus commented with a smile that he advocates good relations with politicians across the political spectrum and said he assured Dzurinda that if there was a change in HZDS leadership, mending relations with parties Meciar had harmed in the past would be a priority.

#### KOZLIK ON THE FUTURE OF HZDS

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¶14. (C) Kozlik believes HZDS' leadership is too small to be representative. Kozlik suggested Veteska could be convinced to withdraw his candidacy if the party bylaws are changed to allow delegates of the congress to nominate Vice-Chairmen. Certainly at least one district would nominate Veteska, who would stand a good chance of being elected since not even Meciar's allies want to see another split in the party. Kozlik said Veteska has discussed having as many as eight party Vice-Chairmen, but suggested that was only to attract supporters. Kozlik suggested Urbani, Veteska, Kramplova and himself are the most likely candidates for a new presidium if delegates are given the right to nominate.

¶15. (C) Without some reform Kozlik sees a realistic threat that HZDS will continue losing votes to Smer on the left and SNS on the right and cease to exist within the next two election cycles. Criticizing Fico and Smer, as Meciar tried at the beginning of their coalition relationship, has been counter-productive. Now Meciar and the party have adopted a wait-and-see strategy, and hope that journalists will be able to dent Smer's strength. The situation is complicated because Smer and Fico are the clear second-favorites of most HZDS voters. Kozlik would not exclude the possibility that, however this leadership battle ends, HZDS could merge with Smer before next elections.

¶16. (C) Kozlik described the coalition with SNS as difficult and claimed Smer has now realized that HZDS is the more civilized partner in the coalition, and Fico is moving closer to them. He described a visit by SNS Deputy Chairman Rudolf Pucik to the European Parliament as a shame and disaster. According to Kozlik, Pucik is a heavy drinker, uncivilized, simple - and representative of his entire party.

#### HASKOVA ON THE FUTURE OF HZDS

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¶17. (C) Haskova told poloff that there is strong support for Veteska's candidacy in the HZDS youth wing, but that she herself is planning to leave both her job as an Assistant to MP Kramplova and her position as International Secretary at party Headquarters no matter the outcome of the party Congress. Haskova railed against the entire HZDS leadership, and said they are all so wrapped up in winning their personal battles and protecting their ill-gotten wealth that no one is concerned about the future of the party. Haskova said HZDS has no power in the current coalition, and doubted that a change in leadership would make any difference. "The government is a one-man show" according to Haskova ) "worse than it ever was under communism."

¶18. (C) Haskova called Milan Urbani a "mental midget." Although she said Meciar is politically closer to Urbani than to Veteska, she described Urbani as a constant embarrassment to the party and the butt of innumerable intra-office jokes. She said it is a source of amusement to Kramplova and others within the HZDS leadership that Urbani is the person the U.S. Embassy chose to make "a pet". She cited his suggestion that ski resort operators should be financially compensated for the lack of snow this past winter as just one example of his tendency to raise ridiculous suggestions publicly without consulting others in the party leadership. (Comment. On the

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other hand, Urbani's very closeness to Meciar has allowed us to influence party positions on issues such as Afghanistan, IPR legislation, support for NGO funding and Kosovo. Other HZDS members have not been willing to support our policies

within the coalition. End comment.)

¶19. (C) Haskova joined HzDS only after the 2006 elections, although she had already worked for the party for several months. She (and several other young colleagues) joined because Kramplova, Urbani and others led them to believe Meciar was ready to promote young, talented and attractive faces. Haskova now believes that was all just lip-service to convince her and others to work as full-time Parliamentary Assistants for a small percentage of the "Assistant's salary" each MP is allocated, while older party loyalists take home the bulk of the money and never do any work. (Comment. Some things never change. End comment.)

VALLEE